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Twenty-third semi-annual report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004)

I. Background

1. The present report is my twenty-third semi-annual report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004). It provides a review and an assessment of the implementation of the resolution since my previous report on the subject, which was issued on 7 October 2015 (S/2015/764). I note the continued lack of progress on key provisions of the resolution and highlight continued concerns about increasing pressure on the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Lebanon.

2. The presidency of Lebanon has remained vacant for almost two years, despite renewed attempts at agreeing on a resolution to the situation. The vacuum and its impact on other Lebanese institutions are a cause of deep concern, as stated by the Security Council in its press statement issued on 17 March (SC/12287). Notwithstanding the momentum that followed proposals for presidential candidates, the Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbullah continued to boycott parliamentary sessions, making the parliament inquorate for the thirty-seventh time. The Council expressed concern at the inability of the parliament to elect a president following the lack of quorum. It reaffirmed its call upon all Lebanese leaders to act responsibly and with leadership and flexibility to urgently convene a parliamentary session and proceed to the election of a president.

3. Despite the increasing rhetoric by both parties, the dialogue between the Future Movement and Hizbullah continued, as did the parliamentary dialogue, both under the auspices of the Speaker of the parliament, Nabih Berri. On 14 January, the Cabinet resumed its sessions for the first time since July 2015.

4. The war in the Syrian Arab Republic continued to have a significant impact on Lebanese security and stability. In a vivid reminder of the vulnerability of Lebanon to the threat of terrorism, on 12 November, Beirut suffered a double suicide attack, in which 43 persons were killed and more than 200 injured, the deadliest incident since the end of the Lebanese civil war, claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). I condemned the attack, reiterated the need for all parties to continue to work to preserve Lebanese stability and security and called for those responsible for that terrorist act to be brought to justice swiftly. On 13 November, the Security Council also condemned it in the strongest terms (see SC/12120).

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5. As reflected in my report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) (S/2016/189), on 20 December, United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) radar recorded three rockets that had been launched from the Force's area of operations towards Israel and, on 4 January, the Israel Defense Forces informed UNIFIL that three improvised explosive devices had been detonated against two Israel Defense Forces vehicles south of the Blue Line, in the Shab'a Farms area. On both occasions, the Israel Defense Forces responded with artillery and mortar fire north of the Blue Line. There were no fatalities. Both incidents are serious violations of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). I condemned both the attack on 4 January and the firing of rockets on 20 December. In addition, I noted that retaliatory fire by Israel into Lebanon also was a violation of resolution 1701 (2006). I called upon the parties to fully respect the cessation of hostilities and urged all concerned to exercise maximum restraint and cooperate with UNIFIL in order to prevent an escalation.

6. On 19 February, Saudi Arabia announced the suspension of its $3 billion contribution of support for the Lebanese Armed Forces and its planned $1 billion of assistance to the Lebanese security services. On 2 March, the Gulf Cooperation Council declared Hizbullah a terrorist organization, as did the League of Arab States on 11 March.

7. The Lebanese Armed Forces continued to respond to multiple security threats to Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity. The security forces remained engaged in combat against armed elements from the Syrian Arab Republic in the eastern border area, in particular around the town of Aarsal. On 1 December 2015, the Nusrah Front released the servicemen from the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces whom it had detained since August 2014, while Lebanese security personnel abducted by ISIL remain detained.

8. Lebanon continued to host the largest number of registered refugees per capita in the world, at 1,069,111. The number of Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic was at 41,000. On 4 February, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations co-hosted a conference in London to raise funds to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of refugees and Lebanese host communities, with a particular focus on education and job creation. In a statement of intent at the conference, the Government of Lebanon presented a five-year programme in which it acknowledged the protracted nature of the crisis and the need for more cost-effective interventions in the period going forward.

9. On 24 and 25 March, I visited Lebanon jointly with the President of the World Bank and the President of the Islamic Development Bank. The visit was aimed at promoting the new Concessional Financing Facility to help to alleviate the impact of the Syrian crisis on the Lebanese economy. The visit included field visits to Tripoli and the Bekaa valley. It allowed us to see first-hand Syrian refugee sites and the Palestine refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared. I also visited the UNIFIL headquarters in southern Lebanon. I addressed political and security issues of concern in my meetings with the Prime Minister, Tammam Salam, the Speaker and the Patriarch, Bechara Rai, as well as in a joint meeting with the leadership of the Lebanese Armed Forces and representatives of the International Support Group for Lebanon.

II. Implementation of resolution 1559 (2004)

10. Since the adoption of resolution 1559 (2004) on 2 September 2004, several of its provisions have been implemented, as I highlighted in my previous reports. The Syrian Arab Republic withdrew its troops and military assets from Lebanon in April 2005. Presidential and parliamentary elections were conducted freely and fairly in 2008 and 2009. Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic established full diplomatic relations in 2009.

11. During the reporting period, the Prime Minister continued to affirm his country's respect for all United Nations resolutions. The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and its corresponding impact on Lebanon, however, continued to limit progress in the implementation of the outstanding provisions of resolution 1559 (2004) and other resolutions pertaining to Lebanon.

12. The delineation of the Syrian-Lebanese border, which was strongly encouraged by the Security Council in its resolution 1680 (2006), remains pending. Moreover, the existence and activities of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias along the border continue to pose a threat to the stability of the country and the region. The Lebanese Armed Forces continue to deploy three regiments on the eastern border, maintaining the most extended presence yet of State authority in that vulnerable area. It remains essential that the State achieve a full monopoly on the possession of weapons and the use of force throughout Lebanon. Continued support from the international community in that regard remains a priority.

13. My representatives and I remained in regular contact with all parties in Lebanon during the reporting period, including through my visit to Lebanon, as well as with relevant regional and international leaders.

A. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon

14. With the adoption of resolution 1559 (2004), the Security Council aimed at strengthening the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon under the sole and exclusive authority of the Government of Lebanon throughout the country, in line with the Taif Accords of 1989, to which all the political parties in Lebanon had committed themselves. That objective has remained the highest priority of my efforts to facilitate the implementation of all resolutions pertaining to Lebanon.

15. The persistent vacuum at the helm of the country is a cause for serious concern. In December, the Future Movement leader, Saad Hariri, endorsed the leader of the Marada Movement, Suleiman Franjieh, as presidential candidate. Subsequently, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, endorsed the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel Aoun, as candidate. Notwithstanding the endorsement by two leaders of the 14 March Movement of two 8 March Alliance figures as candidates, the Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbullah continued to boycott the parliamentary vote.

16. It is noteworthy that the parliament met in an extraordinary session on 12 and 13 November and passed a number of economic and financial bills, demonstrating the important legislative and budgetary role that this institution should be allowed to

play. The Speaker continued his efforts with the Prime Minister to bring key Lebanese institutions back to functionality. Yet, the boycott of parliamentary sessions by the Free Patriotic Movement and Hizbullah continued to render it inquorate, preventing the election of a president.

17. The dialogue between the Future Movement and Hizbullah continued, under the leadership of the Speaker. A twenty-seventh session of the dialogue was held on 13 April, in which the participants highlighted the importance of bolstering the role of the State and that of institutions in disclosing and combating corruption.

18. The Prime Minister continued to demonstrate strong leadership in guiding Lebanon as it faced security, economic and humanitarian challenges. It is critical that his efforts be complemented by those of a functioning cabinet and parliament. The Cabinet met on 28 January 2016 in the first full session since July 2015. The unity of the Cabinet remains fragile and, in a context in which other Lebanese institutions are already paralyzed, it is critical that it unite around the Prime Minister in the national interest of Lebanon. In a session on 2 February, the Cabinet authorized the budget for municipal elections, which now are scheduled to be held beginning on 8 May.

19. Following the decision by Saudi Arabia, on 19 February, to suspend its support to the security forces, the Cabinet held an emergency meeting on 22 February and issued a unanimous statement in which it reaffirmed its support for Arab consensus. The Prime Minister reiterated the Government's condemnation of the attack of 2 January against the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran. A number of Gulf countries urged their nationals not to travel to Lebanon and, on 14 March, Bahrain announced the expulsion of several Lebanese nationals from its territory over their alleged links to Hizbullah. There were unconfirmed reports of further measures taken by some States members of the Gulf Cooperation Council against Lebanese citizens for their alleged links to Hizbullah.

20. The impact of regional events on Lebanon continued to increase the risk of tensions in the country. The Secretary-General of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, and the Future Movement leader emphasized the importance of avoiding sectarian tensions nationally. They also reiterated their commitment to their bilateral dialogue. On 7 March, the Prime Minister called upon Hassan Nasrallah to stop verbal attacks on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States and called for respect of the Baabda Declaration and the policy of disassociation.

21. Protests were held on 27 and 28 February, during which Hizbullah supporters blocked roads south of Beirut and in east Lebanon in response to a televised media show that purported to mock Hassan Nasrallah. The protests prompted concerns of further escalation. In response, the Speaker and the Future Movement leader issued a joint statement on 1 March in which they called for responsible leadership against attempts to incite sectarian strife. Hassan Nasrallah called upon his movement's supporters to refrain from taking action in the streets and dismissed any suggestions that the party planned to repeat the events of May 2008, when armed elements from Hizbullah took to the streets and occupied central Beirut.

22. On 8 April, a former minister, Michel Samaha, was sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment with hard labour for smuggling explosives from the Syrian Arab Republic with a view to perpetrating terrorist acts in Lebanon, as part of a plot against targets there, with the aim of provoking confessional strife after he had been

freed on bail on 14 January. On 21 February, the Minister of Justice and a key figure in the 14 March Movement, Achraf Rifi, resigned from his position, partly in protest over the release of Michel Samaha on bail and what he termed "Hizbullah's domination" over the Cabinet.

23. In its resolution 1680 (2006), the Security Council strongly encouraged the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to respond positively to the request of the Government of Lebanon to delineate their common border. I continue to call upon the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon to achieve the full delineation of their common border. Since the beginning of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, however, progress has been even more difficult to achieve and no tangible steps were taken by either side in that regard during the reporting period.

24. The delineation and demarcation of the boundaries of Lebanon remain elements essential to guaranteeing national sovereignty and territorial integrity. They also remain critical to facilitating proper border control. The complex security situation along the Syrian-Lebanese border in the current circumstances, including continuing reports of cross-border fighting and movements of arms and people, further underlines the urgency of demarcating the border. While acknowledging the bilateral nature of border delineation, progress on the matter remains an obligation of the two countries, in accordance with Security Council resolutions 1680 (2006) and 1559 (2004).

25. Cross-border violations of Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity have continued on the eastern and northern borders as a direct result of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. During the reporting period, there were a number of security incidents across the Lebanese-Syrian border and in Lebanese territory close to the border. There were reports of at least 55 cross-border shooting incidents, three air strikes, 40 incidents of shelling, seven rocket attacks from the Syrian side of the border and two attempted incursions by militants, reportedly resulting in 28 casualties overall. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has continued to conduct air raids in Lebanon, in violation of Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity.

26. The continued occupation by Israel of the northern part of the village of Ghajar and an adjacent area north of the Blue Line stands in violation of the sovereignty of Lebanon and resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). My representatives and I continue to engage closely with both parties, with a view to facilitating the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces from the area, pursuant to resolution 1701 (2006).

27. There was no progress in relation to the issue of the Shab'a Farms area during the reporting period. Furthermore, neither the Syrian Arab Republic nor Israel has responded with regard to the provisional definition of the area contained in my report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), issued on 30 October 2007 (S/2007/641).

28. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace, mostly with unmanned aerial vehicles and fixed-wing aircraft, continued almost daily during the reporting period, in violation of Lebanese sovereignty and resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). The Government of Lebanon has regularly protested against the violations. The Israeli authorities claim that the overflights are carried out for security reasons. I have deplored them and demanded that they should cease immediately.

B. Extension of control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory

29. The Government of Lebanon has reiterated to the United Nations its intention to extend State authority over all Lebanese territory, as called for in the Taif Accords and in resolution 1559 (2004). The Lebanese Armed Forces and the internal security forces have played a crucial role in implementing that commitment under difficult circumstances, but the ability of the Lebanese State to exercise fully its authority over all its territory continues to be challenged.

30. Concern remains at the involvement of Lebanese fighters in the Syrian conflict. Hizbullah has continued to publicly acknowledge its participation in the fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic, contrary to its commitment to the Baabda Declaration and the Lebanese policy of disassociation. Funerals of its members killed in the fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic continued to be held in Lebanon during the reporting period. Other Lebanese nationals have participated in the fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic alongside Syrian opposition forces, the Nusrah Front and ISIL. The involvement of Hizbullah and other Lebanese elements in the fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic seriously jeopardizes the stability and security of Lebanon.

31. The suicide attacks claimed by ISIL that struck the Burj al-Barajnah neighbourhood of southern Beirut on 12 November killed 43 people and injured more than 200. The attack was the deadliest since the end of the Lebanese civil war. The bombing targeted a mostly Shiite area, which risked triggering violence between communities in Lebanon. Lebanese political and religious leaders condemned the bombing and called for solidarity in its aftermath. In a televised speech two days later, Hassan Nasrallah warned against sectarian divisions and praised the internal security forces for their work.

32. The Lebanese security forces continued to engage in combat against Syrian armed elements in the eastern border area, in particular around the town of Aarsal. On 6 November, a bomb exploded in Aarsal, causing four fatalities and a number of injuries. On 7 November, five soldiers were injured in a blast that hit a tank in Aarsal. Between 25 and 29 January 2016, clashes erupted between the Nusrah Front and ISIL as well as between the Lebanese army and those armed elements on the outskirts of Aarsal, causing some injuries among the armed elements. On 20 February, the Lebanese Armed Forces intervened to stop clashes between local individuals in the town of Saadiyat, in which rocket-propelled grenades were used. The area had witnessed similar confrontations in July 2015, resulting in several injuries. On 10 March, a Lebanese soldier was killed in clashes with armed elements, five of whom died, in the vicinity of Baalbek. On 24 March, a Lebanese soldier was killed and three others were injured in a bomb blast in the vicinity of Aarsal. The Lebanese Armed Forces also continued to arrest individuals suspected of belonging to terrorist networks, including suspects believed to be connected to the planning of the attack of 19 November 2013 against the Iranian embassy in Beirut and the recent bombing in Burj al-Barajnah. The political consensus that supported the implementation of the security plans by the national and security forces in Aarsal, Tripoli, the Bekaa area and the southern suburbs of Beirut was maintained. The 16 members of the security forces who had been detained by the Nusrah Front since August 2014 were released on 1 December 2015, as stated in paragraph 7 above. Nine personnel are still being detained by ISIL.

33. The international community continued to support the capacity-building of the Lebanese Armed Forces. On 12 November, the parliament approved the allocation of $800 million for the Lebanese Armed Forces. On 17 March, the Security Council called for the continuation of international support to the Lebanese Armed Forces, including in counter-terrorism and border protection (see SC/12287). Several Member States continued their efforts in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces, as demonstrated by the recent memorandum of understanding signed between Lebanon, the United Kingdom and Canada extending support to the country's land border regiments. Reports of arms smuggling and cross-border incidents continued, highlighting the continued importance of improving the capacity of the security forces to manage and control the border effectively. In my meeting in Beirut with the Lebanese Armed Forces Command and the representatives of the International Support Group for Lebanon on 24 March, there was unanimity about the critical need for continued support from international partners for the Lebanese Armed Forces in their efforts to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon.

34. On 19 December, a Hizbullah militant, Samir Kuntar, was killed, in what Hizbullah alleged was an Israeli air strike in Damascus. Hizbullah claimed responsibility for an attack, on 4 January, against two Israel Defense Forces vehicles south of the Blue Line. It attributed the attack, in reference to the alleged Israeli air strike, to a "martyr Samir al-Kuntar group". The Israel Defense Forces immediately fired high explosive and smoke shells across the Blue Line. These incidents and their aftermath were described in detail in my report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) (S/2016/189).

C. Disbanding and disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias

35. In its resolution 1559 (2004), the Security Council called for the disarming and disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, a key provision of the resolution that has not yet been implemented. It reflects and reaffirms a decision to which all Lebanese committed themselves in the Taif Accords, which led at the time to Lebanese militias, with the exception of Hizbullah, relinquishing their weapons. Given the current national context and the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, it is critical that the Accords be preserved and implemented by all, to avoid the spectre of renewed confrontation in Lebanon and strengthen the institutions of the State.

36. Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias within the country continue to operate outside the control of the Government, in serious violation of resolution 1559 (2004). While several groups across the political spectrum in Lebanon possess weapons outside government control, the armed component of Hizbullah is the most significant and most heavily armed Lebanese militia in the country. The maintenance of arms by Hizbullah and other groups poses a serious challenge to the State's ability to exercise full sovereignty and authority over its territory. In addition, several Palestinian armed groups continue to operate in the country inside and outside the refugee camps. The presence of extremist armed groups in Lebanon, in particular around Aarsal and the Bekaa area, is also deeply worrisome. In a video released on 14 March, ISIL warned the Lebanese authorities that they could not prevent the coming to Lebanon of ISIL.

37. There has been no tangible progress towards the disbanding and disarming of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, as called for in the Taif Accords and resolution 1559

(2004). Since the adoption of the resolution, no specific steps have been taken to tackle that crucial issue, which lies at the heart of the sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon. Several Lebanese groups and individuals continue to speak against the maintenance by Hizbullah of a military arsenal, which they consider to be a destabilizing factor in the country and a factor that undermines democracy. Many Lebanese see the continued existence of such arms as an implicit threat for use within Lebanon for political reasons.

38. I have repeatedly expressed my deep concern to Lebanese leaders about the serious risks that armed groups pose to the stability of the country and the region. I have urged them to tackle the matter without further delay, given that it is their obligation under Security Council resolution 1559 (2004). In a democratic State, it is a fundamental anomaly that a political party maintains its own militia. Nonetheless, Hizbullah has continued to claim openly that its military capacity is separate from that of the Lebanese State and that its arms serve as a deterrent against potential aggression from Israel.

39. The claim of responsibility by Hizbullah for the attack on 4 January underlined the maintenance of unauthorized weapons by Hizbullah, outside the control of the State, and the willingness of Hizbullah to use such weapons against Israel and the risks that that poses to Lebanese stability and security. In a speech on 16 February, Hassan Nasrallah again asserted that Hizbullah maintained a rocket arsenal that he threatened to use to attack Israeli storage installations, which would lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of Israeli citizens. In a televised interview on 20 March, he also stated that Hizbullah knew the location of chemical plants, reactors and warehouses in Israel, some of which were located in or near cities, and warned that it had the capacity to strike such targets in response to any potential attack by Israel against Lebanon. In a letter addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council dated 23 March (S/2016/277), the Permanent Representative of Israel called anew upon the Security Council to respond firmly against the threats made by Hizbullah and called upon the international community to act to disarm Hizbullah. Furthermore, on 11 April, the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, publicly acknowledged that Israel had carried out strikes in the Syrian Arab Republic "meant to prevent Hizbullah from obtaining game-changing weaponry".

40. Besides the engagement of Hizbullah in the Syrian Arab Republic, Hassan Nasrallah stated in a speech on 6 March that Hizbullah personnel from Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic had been sent to Iraq to fight ISIL there. It is of serious concern, especially so in the context of the current tensions in the region, that Hizbullah would become involved in regional conflicts at the risk of threatening Lebanese stability and security. It is important that all Lebanese parties adhere to the dissociation policy and the Baabda Declaration of 2012.

41. I have emphasized in past reports to the Security Council the key role that the National Dialogue has played previously to address the disarmament of armed groups. The absence of the National Dialogue is a reminder of the need to elect a president in order to resume the discussion of a national defence strategy.

42. The situation in the Palestine refugee camps has been tense in recent months, following the announcement on 14 December that adjustments to the hospitalization policy of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) would be implemented from January 2016, whereby the

Agency increased the percentage of tertiary health-care coverage and introduced cost-sharing for some of the expenses previously borne fully by the organization. The Agency has also set up a complementary fund for those in abject poverty. The amendments to the health policy have resulted in repeated, widespread forced closures of UNRWA installations by various political and militant factions, threats to staff and the prevention of movement of goods and personnel. On 21 March, the Agency temporarily suspended the policy for a month to allow for its review. Separately, a Palestine refugee was killed in the Mieh Mieh refugee camp on 13 October. On 28 January, a member of Fatah al-Intifada was shot dead by a Palestinian individual in a personal dispute in the Shatila camp. On 28 March, an armed confrontation between Fatah and extremist elements took place in Ein el-Hillweh, leaving three fighters dead and seven families displaced. The Palestinian joint security force launched investigations into the incidents and continued to contribute to maintaining security in the camps, including by deploying heavily in the camp further to the incident of 28 March and calling for calm in its aftermath. On 12 April, a senior Fatah official in the Mieh Mieh camp was killed in a car bomb near Ein el-Hillweh.

43. Humanitarian conditions for Palestine refugees in Lebanon increasingly are dire, with some 41,000 refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic currently in Lebanon. This places tremendous additional pressure on the overall situation in the camps and gatherings and on the efforts of UNRWA to assist them. UNRWA has taken measures to reduce some of the tensions between the Palestine refugees who have been residing in Lebanon and those arriving from the Syrian Arab Republic by, for example, including refugee children in regular classes in UNRWA schools. During my visit to the Nahr el-Bared camp on 25 March, I welcomed the Government's commitment to completing its reconstruction and urged the international community to provide funding to that end. I continued to urge the Lebanese authorities to improve the living conditions of the refugees. Those efforts should continue without prejudice to the eventual resolution of the Palestine refugee question in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement in the region.

44. The presence of Palestinian armed groups outside the camps continues to challenge the ability of Lebanon to exercise full sovereignty over its territory. Notwithstanding the decision taken in 2006 by the National Dialogue and confirmed in subsequent sessions, no progress was made during the reporting period with regard to dismantling the military bases of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and Fatah al-Intifada in the country. All but one of the bases are located along the Syrian-Lebanese border. Their presence continues to undermine Lebanese sovereignty and governmental authority and makes delineation of the border more difficult. It poses a serious challenge to the effective control of the eastern border between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. I have reiterated my calls upon the Lebanese authorities for the implementation of earlier decisions of the National Dialogue, specifically those relating to the dismantling of the above-mentioned military bases, and upon the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to cooperate with those efforts in good faith.

III. Observations

45. I continue to be disappointed at the lack of further tangible progress made towards the implementation of the remaining provisions of resolution 1559 (2004).

Lebanon continues to face challenges to its stability and security, both internally and along its borders with the Syrian Arab Republic, including from terrorist and extremist groups and arms smuggling. I am concerned that the continued stagnation in the implementation of the resolution could lead to the erosion of provisions already implemented and contribute to a further deterioration in the stability of Lebanon. I reiterate my firm conviction that it is in the best interest of Lebanon and the Lebanese to make progress towards the full implementation of resolution 1559 (2004) for the long-term stability of the country and the region.

46. I am increasingly concerned at the continuing vacancy in the presidential seat; it will soon be two years that the office has been vacant. Lebanon needs a Head of State to address adequately the security, economic, social and humanitarian challenges that it faces. I commend the leadership of the Prime Minister in maintaining unity in the Cabinet and guiding the country in an increasingly tense regional context. Against that backdrop, the recent statements by some Lebanese parties that risk importing regional tensions on to the Lebanese national scene is worrying. The adverse effect that it could have on Lebanese sectarian dynamics, especially at a time when important Lebanese institutions are unable to exercise their regulatory function, should not be underestimated.

47. I note the initiatives aimed at gathering consensus around possible candidates for the presidency and that the parliament and the Cabinet both resumed their work by holding some sessions. This demonstrates that Lebanese leaders can put aside their political differences and unite to allow the functioning of Lebanese institutions. I call upon them to draw on that spirit of unity and responsibility to urgently convene a parliamentary session to elect a president. In this regard, I call upon those who have boycotted such sessions to exercise flexibility and act in the national interest. It is critical that all Lebanese institutions be allowed to function fully so that the country can confront the challenges to its unity and stability.

48. I welcome the decision by the Cabinet to organize and finance municipal elections as an opportunity for the democratic process to resume. It is important that these elections be held on time. I reiterate my call upon Lebanese leaders to strengthen the participation and effective representation of women in the elections.

49. I welcome the continuation of the dialogue between the Future Movement and Hizbullah, as well as the Speaker's role in that connection. In a tense regional context, it is encouraging that all parties have maintained their commitment to the dialogue, which has contributed to upholding the political consensus on the importance of ensuring security and stability in the country. I hope that, in addition to defusing tensions, the continuing dialogue processes will help to end the presidential vacancy.

50. With regard to the serious breaches of the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, in December and January, and as stated in my report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) (S/2016/189), I have repeatedly warned that Hizbullah's maintenance of and demonstrated readiness to use its weapons could increase the risks of conflict, the consequences of which would be gravely damaging for Lebanon. I condemn the threatening statement made by Hassan Nasrallah in his interview of 20 March, following his statement of 16 February. During my visit to Beirut, I stressed the need for both Lebanon and Israel to act responsibly and in accordance with obligations under relevant resolutions and the expectations of the international community in this regard. My Lebanese

interlocutors confirmed their commitment to maintain stability in Lebanon, including along the Blue Line.

51. The continued violations committed by Israel in respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, including the violations of Lebanese airspace by Israel Defense Forces aircraft, remain of serious concern. I reiterate my call upon Israel to adhere to its obligations under the relevant Security Council resolutions, to withdraw its forces from the northern part of the village of Ghajar and to cease its overflights of Lebanese territory.

52. I welcome the resumption of calm since the serious breaches of December and January, as well as the recommitment by both Lebanon and Israel to the cessation of hostilities. Furthermore, I call upon all parties to refrain from provocative rhetoric and to abide by their respective obligations. The full implementation of all provisions of the relevant resolutions remains the best prevention against the risk of miscalculation or tensions.

53. The widespread presence of weapons outside the control of the State, combined with the existence of heavily armed militias, undermines the security of Lebanese citizens. The maintenance by Hizbullah of sizeable and sophisticated military capabilities outside the control of the Government of Lebanon remains a matter of grave concern. It creates an atmosphere of intimidation and represents a key challenge to the safety of Lebanese civilians and to the government monopoly on the legitimate use of force. I reiterate my call upon Hizbullah and all other groups concerned not to engage in any militant activity inside and outside Lebanon, consistent with the requirements of the Taif Accords and resolution 1559 (2004).

54. I regret that the absence of a president prevented the convening of the National Dialogue during the reporting period and that no progress therefore was made in implementing existing decisions made therein or further addressing the issue of disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese groups. It will be important that the president, once elected, consider ways to take these decisions forward as a priority.

55. I have repeatedly condemned the continued violations of the sovereignty of Lebanon, including cross-border incidents in which civilians and members of the national armed forces have been killed or injured on the Lebanese side of the border because of the actions of warring parties in the Syrian Arab Republic. The cross-border shelling and rocket attacks by various groups in the Syrian Arab Republic and the air raids by the Syrian air force on Lebanese territory must cease. Those incidents are a clear violation of Lebanese sovereignty. I continue to call upon all parties, including the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, in accordance with Security Council resolution 1559 (2004).

56. The participation of Lebanese citizens in the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic is a breach of the policy of disassociation and the principles of the Baabda Declaration, which was agreed upon by all Lebanese parties in June 2012. The involvement of Hizbullah and other Lebanese elements in the fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic seriously jeopardizes the security and stability of Lebanon. I remain deeply concerned about the ongoing threat to Lebanon posed by terrorism and extremism, including from groups such as ISIL and the Nusrah Front. I deplore and condemn the terrorist attack of 12 November and commend the response of Lebanese leaders who came together in solidarity and contributed to preventing further violence, in a context in which risks of sectarian violence did exist. I am concerned by reports of the involvement of Hizbullah and other Lebanese elements

in fighting elsewhere in the region, including in Iraq, which risks exposing Lebanon to even greater security threats.

57. The support provided by the international community to the national armed forces and the security forces remains essential to building their capacity to address the multiple security challenges that the country faces. Not doing so could send the wrong signal to those groups or elements intent on destabilizing Lebanon. It is also important that the Lebanese security forces continue to maintain their neutrality in national political disputes and protect their independence as a national defence force and, on this basis, that they be equipped adequately to prevent security threats. I welcome the memorandum of understanding signed by the United Kingdom and Canada in support of the armed forces border regiment, as well as the further delivery of assistance by the United States of America during the reporting period. As Lebanese security forces continue to face threats to the country's security and stability, their ability to confront these will continue to depend on international support and I call upon international partners to increase their support accordingly.

58. I commend the continued efforts of the Lebanese Armed Forces in protecting the country's borders, as well as its security and territorial integrity, against repeated attempts at jeopardizing national stability. The positive impact of the deployment of border regiments continued to be felt across the country, in particular by communities that are located near the border and are vulnerable to attempts by extremist groups, such as ISIL and the Nusrah Front, to infiltrate the country.

59. I was deeply relieved by the release of the soldiers who had been detained by the Nusrah Front for more than a year. I condemn the continued detention of the remaining soldiers and security forces personnel held captive by ISIL and call for their immediate release.

60. I welcome the continuing cooperation between the various State security agencies and the national armed forces, which has led to progress in countering terrorism in the country, including through the detention and arrest of a number of extremists, some of whom in connection with the attack in Burj al-Barajnah. I encourage the political consensus that allowed the security plans to be maintained, given that it is essential to ensuring the necessary support to the security forces as they contribute to preserving Lebanese security and stability. Broad political support for the security operations, including subsequent judicial processes, remains necessary to clearly signal that violence with impunity will not be tolerated.

61. I continue to urge the Government of Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces to take all measures necessary to prohibit Hizbullah and other armed groups from acquiring weapons and building paramilitary capacity outside the authority of the State, in violation of resolution 1559 (2004). The discussion paper on a national defence strategy, developed in the context of the National Dialogue, remains a valuable starting point in that regard. I also call upon countries in the region that maintain close ties with Hizbullah to encourage the transformation of the armed group into a solely political party and its disarmament, in accordance with the requirements of the Taif Accords and resolution 1559 (2004), which is in the best interests of Lebanon and regional peace and security.

62. The situation of Palestine refugees in Lebanon and the limited resources available to UNRWA to assist them remains a matter of concern, especially in the light of the continued presence of Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic who have fled the violence there. Continuing closures by political and militant groups jeopardize the Agency's ability to meet its obligations to both the refugees

and the international community. I count on the Government of Lebanon to continue to support and protect UNRWA services and staff so that the Agency remains able to assist the Palestine refugee community in Lebanon. Financial support to UNRWA remains crucial in allowing it to deliver vital services to Palestine refugees in Lebanon. I call upon donors to increase their support to the Agency. I note the work of the Palestinian joint security force in preventing an escalation of conflict on several occasions in the Ein el-Hillweh camp and welcome the renewed commitment of Palestinian leaders to disassociating the camps in Lebanon from the violence in the Syrian Arab Republic and the region more broadly.

63. I regret the absence of any progress on the delineation and demarcation of the border with the Syrian Arab Republic, which has a significant impact on border control. I reiterate my view that integrated border management will, in the longer term, contribute significantly to better control of the borders of Lebanon and help to prevent the illegal transfer of weapons and fighters in both directions, which has become even more pressing in the context of events in the Syrian Arab Republic.

64. Recent security developments, especially in the eastern border region of Lebanon, have put even greater pressure on the refugees, the host communities that receive them and the country as a whole, necessitating further support from the international community. I again commend the unique contribution of Lebanon as a provider of public good in hosting refugees, and welcome the Government's efforts at developing sustainable approaches to address the crisis, reflecting its protracted nature and the need to consider more sustainable solutions pending the eventual return of the refugees in accordance with international law. I encourage further close coordination between the Government and the United Nations in their efforts to host, assist and protect refugees in accordance with human rights and humanitarian principles. The Syrian crisis constitutes not only a major humanitarian and socioeconomic challenge for Lebanon but also a challenge to the country's stability and must be addressed as such.

65. I strongly encourage Member States, including regional donors, to fulfil their burden-sharing responsibilities by expeditiously implementing the disbursement of pledges made at the conference held in London on 4 February 2016 and earlier commitments made at the Kuwait donor conference held on 31 March 2015. I welcome the opportunity presented by the new Concessional Financing Facility developed jointly by the United Nations, the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, and urge Lebanon and the donor community to be forthcoming in facilitating the implementation of this important source of support for Lebanese stability. I look forward to specific follow-up efforts to the conference held in London and to my recent joint visit to Lebanon, including under the auspices of the International Support Group for Lebanon.

66. The security, stability and unity of Lebanon are under continuous pressure as the country faces a tense regional environment and needs to preserve itself from the impact on its domestic situation. I remain firmly committed to the implementation of resolution 1559 (2004). I therefore count on the continued commitment of the Government to its international obligations and call upon all parties and actors to fully abide by resolutions 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006). I also call upon Member States to renew efforts to support Lebanon in ensuring respect for its obligations under those resolutions as the best way to advance the country's long-term prosperity and stability as a democratic State. I will continue my efforts towards the full implementation of those and all other resolutions pertaining to Lebanon.